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RICHARD MANSFIELD—THE MAN.

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON.

DURING the latter years of his career, Richard Mansfield exercised an almost unrivalled empery over the theatre-going public: he was the one performer they would always flock to see, regardless of the play he chose to give them. No other actor of our times could have achieved a popular success with the panoramic epic of "Peer Gynt": even the author himself did not regard that many-mooded poem as suited for the stage: but, when Mr. Mansfield chose to produce it, the public had to see it, for the simple but sufficient reason that they had to see Mr. Mansfield.

And the reason why they felt that they had to see Mr. Mansfield was not merely that he was one of the ablest actors of his time. The average audience has but very slight appreciation of the finer points of acting; it is won and held more by personality than by histrionic art. And I think that everybody will agree that Mr. Mansfield owed his unprecedented popularity less to his subtle and versatile accomplishment as an actor than to his emphasis as a man. After all, it was his momentous personality that most impressed the public. In saying this, I do not mean to belittle in any way his exquisite and finished art: I wish, rather, to indicate that his art was the expression of an elemental human force which swayed the multitude. The theatre-goer needed only to pay a dollar or two to come into the presence of a mighty and commanding personality; and such an experience is not often to be had in this drifting and transitory world, even upon far less simple terms. The mere appearance of Mr. Mansfield upon the stage was an event. He skilfully impersonated Chevril or Brummel, Alceste or Cyrano; but what the audience felt was not so much a delicate impersonation as a vivid

and important human presence, imperial in power, that swayed them to a larger sense of life.

For this reason Mr. Mansfield was, to those who knew him privately, even more impressive off the stage than on. That elemental human power which was his, showed all the more emphatic when he was disencumbered of the trappings and the suits of stage disguises. It has seemed to me, therefore, that many people who felt the impress of his personality only through the medium of his art may wish to know how he appeared in private life. My impressions of him are confined to the last year of his career. Before that I had never met him; but during the summer of 1906 he asked me to settle near his country-seat, in order that I might set to work toward the fulfilment of certain purposes he had in mind for me. For over two months I saw him nearly every day; and one time and another, at different hours of the day and evening, he talked with me in almost every vein.

The most surprising thing about him was the sweep and lightning-dartle of his moods. His mind shifted with unusual vivacity of variation. He alternated moments of sudden and incalculable enthusiasm with moments of apparent dulness and uninterest of mind. In any matter you presented to his notice, he was always more interested, or less interested, than you; he never met you on a dead level of emotion; the thing was, for the moment, all or nothing to him. Sometimes when you talked to him, he would snatch at some suggestion and whirl you aloft on soaring pinions of enthusiasm; and at other times, though you returned to the same subject and presented it in a similar way, he would listen only with deaf ears and with utter lack of interest. You could never be certain that what appealed to him to-day would also appeal to him to-morrow. Often he would kindle in considering some project and sweep all other plans aside; and the next day you would find, to your surprise, that he had shuffled the matter from his mind, and possibly forgotten it entirely. One week he had apparently decided to produce "*L'Ami Fritz*": the next week he had decided not to do so: and it was impossible to predict, on the basis of either decision, whether or not he would eventually perform the play. Meanwhile, his mind was swaying from one side to the other in considering a vaster undertaking. I had gone to the beach early one morning, and was lolling on a bathing-raft. He swam out to me, climbed upon the

raft, and said: "I am going to do 'Peer Gynt' this fall; did I tell you?" He then asked me to be at hand next morning at a certain hour, so that we might talk over the arrangement of an acting version. At the appointed time next day, he took me for a walk around his garden, chatted of the weather, asked if I thought the wind would freshen for a sail, and then suddenly suggested that we go for a drive. I ventured a hint of Ibsen's poem. He seemed very much surprised. "You didn't really think I was going to do that, did you?" he asked. He then explained to me why the piece could not be produced. A few hours later he telegraphed to New York for the scenery.

The natural way for him to consider any matter of importance was to let his mind dartle all around it, now in this mood, now in that, until at last it swooped to a decision. He was utterly unlogical in all his processes of thought. He never reasoned consecutively. He arrived at his results, apparently, by intuition. In one mood, a certain thing was so, because he felt it was; in a contrary mood, the same thing was not so, because he felt it wasn't: and whether ultimately the thing was so or not, depended on whether the sum-total of the moods in which he considered it flung the greater emphasis on the positive or the negative side. Neither in conversation nor in thought did he march logically, step by step, from premises to conclusions; and he always seemed impatient of other people when, in talking to him, they reasoned with laborious logic. The conclusion was all he cared about. Also, in his own talk, he was extremely sparing of details: his imagination struck home to the heart of the matter; he would incorporate all he had to say in a single luminous sentence, and would then dismiss the subject with a gesture of finality.

The process of his thought was habitually concrete; he never seemed to think abstractly. He expressed himself in images rather than in propositions. On one occasion, when he wished to explain that love scenes in English are necessarily less lyric than love scenes in French and therefore more difficult to act poetically, he said all he had to say in a single concrete sentence: "There's such a difference between '*Ah, que je t'aime!*—*ah, que je t'adore!*' and, 'You know, Mary, I'm awfully fond of you!'"

His sense of character was entirely concrete: often he expressed his opinion of a person by subtly imitating him. "He does this sort of thing," he would remark, and then would finish

the sentence with a gesture or an attitude. He could sense a situation best by imagining himself its central figure, and then feeling what, in it, he himself would say and do.

He realized all things by perception rather than by intellection. He was sensitive, instead of being, in the strict sense, intelligent. Images swarmed into his mind helter-skelter; and he leaped from one to another of them without awareness of the gaps of pure abstraction that lay between them. It is a prime evidence of the greatness of his mind that his ultimate decisions, though often without apparent logical foundation, were almost invariably right. Several of his friends tried to convince him, by very logical arguments, that "Peer Gynt" would not prove a popular, as well as an artistic, success. His answer was that he knew it would. After circumstances had proved him right in such a case, he had a way of saying, "I knew it; I knew it all along; I told you that I knew it," which left his friends to wonder why.

In talking with you he gave you only the results of his thinking: the processes of thought by which he had arrived at these results remained always hidden from you. It was therefore very difficult to understand him thoroughly. He never attempted to explain himself; and it is doubtful if he would have been able to even if he had tried. Things were so because he knew they were: why ask for explanation? Also, he never argued with you. You said your say, and he at once accepted or dismissed it: and that was all there was to the matter. And if you ventured, "But, on the other hand, Mr. Mansfield," . . . he would probably suggest some toast and tea, or wonder if the water would be warm for swimming. In any interchange of thought, he talked wonderfully, with sudden illuminative sallies of imagination, so long as he held the matter entirely in his grasp and could dash from certainty to certainty: but if you disagreed with him, and attempted, by argument, to thwart him, he would grow impatient of the whole game and (like the Oriental monarch) overturn the chess-board. The next day, likely enough, his mood had changed; and he would tell *you* what you had tried vainly to tell *him* the day before. Hence, if you wished ultimately to convince him, you had to wait until his mood swung around to yours and then agree with him emphatically. He could not understand you, except when you agreed with him: at other times he heard you with his ears, but not with his mind.

He had an extraordinary faculty for "taking his own where he found it," as Molière phrased the mental process. Most of what you said meant nothing to him; but the things that meant anything at all meant very much indeed. In a flash he seized and grasped your thought, and in the same flash he made it a part of his own mind. Then he was likely enough to talk it back to you, as if it had been always his and never yours. He did not understand your thought as yours: in order to understand it, he had to absorb it first and make it his. Hence, in matters of thought, he appeared entirely self-sufficient. You never seemed to give him anything: instead of saying, "That's a good idea," he would merely say, "Of course!"

Since he neither argued nor explained, there was an air of finality about his statements. He emphatically told you where he stood: what were you going to do about it? He didn't open subjects: he closed them. He was always swooping to conclusions; and though you still had something in your mind to say, you were deterred by the emphasis of his unspoken "That will do." There was nothing petty in his self-assertion. You felt behind it the full power of his vast and sweeping mind. He was so sure that he was right that he often convinced you by contagion; and you found yourself agreeing with him even when you could not understand the reason why.

His energy of self-assertion gave him an air of dominance which was perhaps his most obvious personal quality. His close professional associates always spoke of him as "The Chief": and I remember how once, when I was taking leave of some other friends in order to keep an appointment with Mr. Mansfield, I unconsciously recalled and spoke the line from "Beau Brummel," "I have a very pressing engagement with His Majesty." Thereafter I often thought of Mr. Mansfield as "His Majesty." In all his ways he was imperial. He commanded always; he never took commands: and the habit of years had given him a certain magnificence of manner, as of one speaking from a throne. No matter how many other people were present, nor how interesting they were as individuals, you were always aware of Mr. Mansfield as the central and commanding figure of the group. He seemed somehow more alive than other people; he was more ardent and intense; he hurled himself at you with a more compelling vigor. You could not get away from the keen impression of his pres-

ence. When he presided at the dinner-table, you found it difficult to look long at anybody else; your eyes would constantly revert to him. I can see him now dancing a Virginia Reel in the great hall of The Grange, with such an eagerness of young enjoyment that he lured your eyes away from all the pretty girls who were fluttering around the room. Because of the imperial sweep and sway of his manner, he gave you constantly the impression of being taller and heavier than he actually was. He was, of course, very stockily built, deep-chested and strong-limbed; but he was a short man, and without grandeur of mere physical appearance. The same body, carried lax, would not have caught your eye; the same face, struck expressionless, would not have interested you. And yet he sustained with such conviction the imperial mood that many men more grandly built in body and more beautiful in face looked unimportant when they stood beside him. Mr. Mansfield somehow made you bow to the superbness of his personality. His unconquerable self-assertion, his habit of dominance, his imperial quality (call it by whatever name you will) was his greatest asset as an actor. When he came upon the stage, he ruled the audience. He exuded power and compelled submissive admiration. There he was before you, flinging at you all the might and ardor of his nature. What were you going to do about it?

An imperial nature can scarcely sustain itself without the element of pride. Mr. Mansfield was very proud; he was also somewhat vain; but he was not (to my mind) self-conceited. And here, in order to avoid misunderstanding, I must state exactly what is meant by the words as they are used in this connection. By self-conceit is meant the self-delusion that arises from an overestimate of one's own powers; by vanity is meant a just estimate of one's own powers accompanied by an enjoyment of the exhibition of them for the purpose of exciting admiration; and by pride is meant the enjoyment for its own sake of a just estimate of one's own powers, because that estimate is high. Mr. Mansfield was not self-conceited. He had a very keen sense of what he could not do, as well as of what he could; and in his work as an artist he very wisely kept within his range. He would never have attempted Hamlet, though the part has allured nearly every other actor of prominence from Shakespeare's day to ours. He did not equally esteem all his own creations.

Beau Brummel was his favorite part, and he very justly thought himself incomparable in it; but I distinctly remember his telling me that his Don Carlos was not a good performance (he even said that in one scene he was "rotten"); and on more than one occasion he stated that the public had overestimated his performance of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He was somewhat vain, however: he loved to excite admiration off the stage as well as on. Even in trivial matters, such as games and sports, he always liked you to feel that he had the upper hand. He enjoyed his own incomparable voice, and seemed usually conscious of it when several other people happened to be present. And his pride was very great. I do not hesitate to bear witness, on the evidence of a great many conversations in his glowing hours, that he considered himself not only the greatest actor of his time, but also one of the greatest actors who ever lived. More than once, when his mood was entirely serious, he set himself above Sir Henry Irving and Mme. Sarah Bernhardt; and of many lesser actors who are generally esteemed, he felt, and sometimes expressed, a very low opinion. He liked to compare his weekly receipts with those of other popular performers; and he was proud of the fact that he had made a large fortune by his own unaided efforts. I state these matters because I feel that Mr. Mansfield's pride, and even his vanity, contributed greatly to a certain overwhelming quality in his performances. His pride was built upon a very firm foundation. There was nothing empty in his vaunting self-esteem. He felt so certainly that he was a great actor that he was able to convince his audiences of the fact almost by contagion alone.

I have spoken already of the extraordinary enthusiasm with which he flung himself into the mood of the moment,—an enthusiasm which extinguished even the subconsciousness of all other moods, whether past or future. He was more intense than other people. He was endowed with a superabundance of energy, yearning always to exhaust itself. I suspect that the very arduousness of *Peer Gynt* as an acting part was one of the main motives that lured him to undertake it at a time when his health was shattered and he felt that he was doomed. Nothing could daunt his tremendous zest and his unreasonable daring. He never did things by halves: what he did at all, he did with all the power that was in him. Often, in his musing moments, he would ex-

press regret that he could burn the candle only at both ends. He was incapable of rest. Sometimes on a sunny summer morning he would resolve to rest himself by spending all the day in play; and then, through the succeeding hours, we would watch him weary himself in over-arduous attempts to avoid activity of mind. With tiring intensity he would shift from driving to swimming, from swimming to motoring, from motoring to sailing, from sailing to walking, without ever gaining lassitude of body or laxity of mind.

A necessary corollary of his restlessness was an habitual impatience. Whatever he could do at once, he did at once, entirely: and he expected other people to do the same. His motto was "*Maintenant.*" He exalted the present moment always. He never put things off. In the expressive words of the popular song, he wanted what he wanted when he wanted it. Because of an exaggeration of this feeling, he was often unreasonable in the demands he made on those about him. I remember, as a trivial illustration of this trait, how one afternoon upon the beach he asked a friend of his to collect some hermit-crabs for him. The tiny animals were scurrying about, half-buried in the sand beneath tumbled waves of dingy water; they were difficult to discern and hard to seize: but, "Pick them up by handfuls," he commanded, "Pick them up by handfuls," and seemed impatient of the other person's inability to do so. In mental matters, as I have said already, he never explained himself; but he felt things with such intensity that it seldom occurred to him that the person he was dealing with did not feel them at the same moment in the same way. Hence he often expected the other person to act from a motive that lived only in his own mind; and when the other person failed of the expected action, he could not realize the reason why.

For this reason, and for this reason only, he was hard to get along with. No man could have been more difficult to understand; but if you happened to be in his employ, he expected you always to understand him, and always to do at once what he wanted you to do, even though he had not told you what he wanted. He demanded of other people what he was accustomed to demand of himself. In this he was, of course, unreasonable. This is the explanation, doubtless, of the fact that many actors left his company in a huff and afterwards made statements in

the press which were unfair to Mr. Mansfield. To this extent he was inconsiderate of others: he lacked an imaginative awareness of the necessary difference between his own thoughts and feelings and those of the other people he was dealing with. He was too exclusively self-centred to understand entirely that other people had their centre also in themselves instead of in him. But he was by nature kindly, by habit courteous, by disposition generous; and though I often saw him impatient, I never knew him to be angry. He had a nervous temperament, but he did not have a bad temper.

But because he was hard to understand, it was difficult, even for his friends, to come into intimate contact with him. He impressed you emphatically; but he failed somehow, in the deepest sense, to touch you personally. At all moments he interested you; at many moments he fascinated you; but he seldom drew you close to him. He was imperial in his hospitality, his generosity, his kindness, just as he was imperial in all his other qualities; but he lacked ability to meet you simply, on a common ground of sympathetic understanding. He was more isolated, personally, than any other great man of his time. Other actors did not like him, as a rule; and he seldom associated with them off the stage. Most of his intimates were men in other walks of life,—fellow gentlemen instead of fellow artists. They grew fond of him because they wondered at him. He felt his isolation poignantly. More than once he struck an almost tragic note when he deplored that almost no one understood him. "Millions of people have seen me on the stage," he said once, with that sweep of the right arm from the shoulder and backward flutter of the right hand from the wrist which was his most characteristic gesture; and then his arm dropped to his side as he added, "But how many of them understand all that I have meant and tried to do?"

His humor was a little lacking in geniality. It was large and comprehensive; but it usually inclined to the sardonic. His smile was somewhat marred by a slight sidelong and downward drag of the left corner of the mouth. His wit was sudden, sharp and penetrant: it had the glitter and the stab of steel. He was richly endowed with the gentler emotions; but they were usually overlaid with an imperial reserve. He seldom visibly expressed the tenderness which, none the less, you felt to be inherent in his

nature. His intimate sensibilities were more receptive than expressive. He was keenly, almost uncomfortably, sensitive to a personal evidence of kindness toward him from any of **his** friends. The slightest gift to him would touch him deeply, because he felt intensely the spirit of the giving. Perhaps he showed most humanly with children. He had no reserve with them: with them he did not find it difficult to meet on common ground. And he told them tales, or sang them songs, or led them at their games, with a large and gentle understanding.

But, though his sweeter phases often surprised you unawares, the normal impression that he gave you was that of colossal power, self-enclosed and yearning for expression. You felt that he might have achieved greatness in any art; because, whatever the medium of expression, the thing expressed would have been powerful and energetic. He had written poems and many sorts of prose; in his youth he had painted pictures; he had composed the music for a book of songs; he had shown great skill in singing and in dancing: and yet you felt always in him a certain inexplicable force transcending all expression. Acting was his proper medium of utterance, chiefly because it is the most personal of all the arts. Only through acting could he show you not only what he had to say, but also the man who had to say it.

He was an actor, therefore, by inherent necessity of character, even more than by training and accomplishment. Even in his private life there was about him a constant suggestion of the foot-lights. He was always playing a part, and playing it wonderfully well, though most of the time he was not conscious of doing so. He was never for a moment insincere; he was always emphatically real: and, in stating that he habitually played a part, I mean merely that he was always giving wonderful expression, through his voice, his carriage, his mobility of face, to the mood that for the moment burned within him. The great public may debate whether Chevalier or Brummel, Richard or Ivan, Cyrano or Peer Gynt was the best of his impersonations; but now that he is gone, his private friends will remember him most poignantly in still a greater character,—the character of host.

CLAYTON HAMILTON.